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ABSTRACT

A naturalistic study explored a classroom in which multiple history text resources were present and actively used by fifth-grade students. The teacher used the textbook and supplemented it with a wide assortment of trade books. Students worked in small groups of 3 to 5 students. Data included field notes of classroom observations and in-depth interviews of a sub-sample of the class (3 males and 3 females of average achievement) before and after their unit on English colonization in North America. Six themes or patterns emerged: (1) students opted to use the trade books first, found them more interesting and informative, and enjoyed reading them more than their textbook; (2) textbook authors did not give an account of where they had obtained the information they used to construct their historical renditions; (3) students frequently used an information-quantity criterion to judge the different types of books available in terms of the quality as well as the different perspectives and material presented; (4) emerging from the use of a variety of text sources were some indications that students found the author's point of view important in making judgments about a source's reliability; (5) reading from various accounts did not foster many questions or concerns; and (6) students did not specifically note differences between textbooks and trade books. Findings suggest that students enjoy trade books and, when possible, gravitate to them for research projects. (Contains 15 references.) (RS)

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NRRC

Ongoing Research

How do Multiple Text Sources Influence Learning to Read American History in Fifth Grade?

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History Textbooks, Trade books, and Text-Rich Classroom Possibilities

Learning and understanding history is heavily dependent on written text as a principal means by which learners obtain access to traces of the past. The written texts that students encounter in fifth grade include the standard textbook series and supplemental texts often referred to as historical trade books. The most commonly used text is the standard, encyclopedic textbook. These textbooks have been criticized for, among other things, their lack of reader considerateness, their mundane expository style, and the disconnected nature of the events they portray (e.g., Beck & McKeown, 1991; Beck, McKeown, & Gromoll, 1989; McCabe, 1993; Sewall, 1988; Tyson & Woodward, 1989). Because young students find textbooks dull and difficult to process, they frequently fail to read or take them seriously. When students do read their textbooks, often the ideas they understand are disconnected and decontextualized (McKeown & Beck, 1994).

Teachers, who must rely on these textbooks, find this result rather dismaying. In many elementary classrooms, teachers supplement (sometimes replacing entirely) the standard textbooks with a rich array of the now widely available trade books (Tomlinson, Tunnell, & Richgels, 1993). In contrast to expository textbooks, trade books often take the form of compelling narratives. Authors use dramatic representation and fictionalizing dimensions to seduce young readers into the story portrayed (see Freeman & Levstik, 1988; Richgels, Tomlinson, & Tunnell, 1993). Because the books are "supplemental," the authors and publishers have not worried about word counts and readability formulas per se; they have been left to construct the most compelling and seductive, yet reasonably accurate history books they can sell to augment the textbook market. But what influence do these trade books have on young readers' developing historical understanding, especially when they are used in concert with textbooks? Do multiple sources of historical information enhance reading engagement and broaden understanding?

There is little empirical research that addresses these questions. However, one study suggested that students who read trade books regularly but who were not taught to distinguish different types of historical texts, authors' purposes, and subtextual features, conflated the dramatic narrative *form* of the trade books with the *content* of history (VanSledright & Brophy, 1992). In other words, these students tended to think that if historical accounts were dramatic and built around narrative forms, then they were history, without much regard to the accepted conventions of proper evidence employed by historians.

Despite the direction some students took in this earlier study, it is possible that learning history in a text-rich environment can actually enhance reading engagement and historical understanding (see Levstik, 1989). Fifth-graders, for example, might encounter different versions of similar events, producing a level of cognitive dissonance and creating a need to resolve the disparity. When researching their topic, students may also encounter a variety of sources. This situation could require them to make judgments about significance and reliability in order to determine which source(s) would be best to use. In much the way an historian "interrogates" the evidence searching for patterns and inconsistencies, text-rich learning contexts could promote similar thinking and similar research-oriented pursuits. Judging sources of evidence used to support historical assertions, raising questions of significance, and assessing quality of arguments could come to dominate the way students encounter the past. Students, possibly out of necessity or by being taught directly, would learn to read for subtexts and to identify authors' frames of reference; in short, they might learn to read more like their expert, historian counterparts. This type of learning would most likely signal a marked improvement over that which requires relatively passive acquisition of the facts found in encyclopedic textbooks. But, to reiterate, we know little about whether or not this is what happens in classrooms. This study was designed to explore a classroom in which multiple history-text sources were present and actively used by young students.

Research Context

To establish a naturalistic research context, we chose a fifth-grade class taught by a teacher who used the textbook and supplemented it with a wide assortment of trade books. My NRRC research assistant, Christine Kelly, and I focused on two different reading experiences: (1) where students' research into the past relied primarily on the textbook as a source of information; and (2) where students' research relied almost solely on trade books for information. In both projects, students worked in small groups of three to five students. Data included field notes of classroom observations and in-depth interviews of a subsample of the class (six students, 3 males, 3 females of average achievement) before and after their unit on English colonization in North America. We were concerned primarily with what students knew about colonization before and after studying the unit, their perspectives on the texts they used, and how they thought the texts needed to be read and for what purposes. We were also interested in students' observations about the differences among the texts and whether they believed those differences needed to be taken into account in order to learn from these texts.

Students learned about the development of the British colonies in America through two research projects. Following the chronological development of the colonies, students were clustered into small groups and then chose from a list of colonies their teacher had prepared about which they were to do research. For this first project, the goal was to learn as much about these early colonies as possible; write a research report which detailed the facts of settlement, leaders, economic activity, religious practice, and so forth; and then produce a poster or "advertisement" that attempted "to sell" the colony to potential immigrants. The books that students were able to use in their research on these colonies included the textbook *The United States: Its History and Its Neighbors* (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1991) and a series of trade books (Hakim, 1993-1995) which included *Making Thirteen Colonies* (Hakim, 1993), as well as *Voices in African American History: The Colonies* (Modern Curriculum Press, 1994) and a series of 13 short hardcover books, one on each of the original thirteen colonies. With few exceptions, students chose trade books as the sources of information for this project.

For the second research project, research groups explored the later development of the colonies by region (northern, middle, and southern), one group per region. Three groups also were assigned specifically to research slavery in the colonies, again by region. The project culminated in a report to the class by each group. Groups used poster boards to present their findings. The books students could read for information were the same ones used in the previous project. However, the teacher recommended that students researching colonial regions focus their searches for information on the textbook. The groups researching slavery were asked to focus on the *Voices in African American History: The Colonies* trade book. Although other trade books (and an encyclopedia set) were available, the students generally followed the teacher's request.

Results

Six themes or patterns emerged from the observation and interview data on the colonies unit.

- *Theme 1.* Generally, when given the choice, these students opted to use the trade books first, found them more interesting and informative, and enjoyed reading them more than their textbook.
- *Theme 2.* Authors of the texts students read did not give an account of where they had obtained the information they used to construct their historical renditions, thus inhibiting students' ability to make judgments about reliability and validity of the evidence.

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- *Theme 3.* When researching their projects, students frequently used an information-quantity criterion to judge the different types of books available in terms of the quality as well as the different perspectives and material presented. This was largely a consequence of the classroom context and teacher's activity requirements, derived from school district curriculum objectives that viewed history and history books as fact repositories.
- *Theme 4.* Despite the commonness of the information-quantity criterion, emerging from the use of a variety of text sources were some indications that students found the author's point of view important in making judgments about a source's reliability. Such realizations indicated that young readers within a discipline new to them possess some of the requisite skills necessary to read like their expert, historian counterparts.
- *Theme 5.* Reading from the various accounts themselves did not foster in students many questions or concerns about how historical significance and validity issues are discussed or resolved.
- *Theme 6.* Despite differences in content and form between the textbooks and trade books and among the different trade books, students did not note these differences specifically or suggest that the books be read in different ways.

Implications

Does a text-rich classroom environment promote interest in reading historical texts and deeper levels of historical understanding? This study suggests that students enjoy trade books and, when possible, gravitate to them for research projects. It seems that the presence of an array of texts, when students have some control over their own learning, increases their engagement in reading history. This study also provides little direct evidence of the content-form entanglements noted in previous research (VanSledright & Brophy, 1992). On the other hand, the task of searching historical accounts for information without having well-developed tools to evaluate the quality of that information, probably does little to enhance historical understanding and may support and/or foster content-form fusions.

To move closer to advanced levels of historical understanding through more engaged readers of history will necessitate teaching a different view of history and cultivating perspectives on reading historical accounts that encourage students to employ reading strategies such as assessing point of view, exploring possible subtexts, and looking for bias. Without these measures, students will likely continue to find trade books more stylistically interesting, but will not necessarily develop into more engaged readers of history or move to more skillful and expert levels of historical understanding and literacy.

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